

[The Blacksmith]

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THE BLACKSMITH (Tool Sharpener)

He was a slender man, but with a wiry nervous strength and quickness. In the lean face his blue eyes were alert and sharp with a whimsical light that matched the curve of his mouth. For a man of forty-five he was very young, quite boyish at times. The term blacksmith seemed incongruous — until you noticed the big, strong hands and muscular forearms. [French?] himself, he had married a Swedish woman, sturdy, cheerful and dependable. They had four children, the oldest girl just out of high school. And they all enjoyed one another's company, their own good times, and life in general.

No, I didn't come in with the strike-breakers from Canada in 1920, or was it '21, [Alphonse?] said. I was here long before that. My father had a farm outside East Barre. Before that he farmed near Quebec. I was a kid when we moved down here, but I never liked the farm. I tried a farm of my own though, after I got married. I've tried just about everything. But I didn't like it much farming. So we sold out and moved into town. [?????]

I worked in garage there. I always liked fooling around machines. Then I had a garage of my own. That went, too. We've had a funny life, Alice and me. She's always been a good sport about it. I'd make money in one thing and then lose it in another.

But when I was young I learned blacksmithing and tool-sharpening. In them days the stonecutting tools went to 2 regular blacksmith shops. Now of course the sheds have

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their own. I used to hang around in this blacksmith shop on the Hill because all the old characters hang out in there. Real characters too, by God. And did they put the liquor into them! I never saw such drinking as those old-timers did. They drank enough to kill anything or anybody. And most of them lived to be old. They were men in those days. Tough old Scotchmen and Swedes and Irish. You couldn't hurt them with an ax.

I hung around listening to them talk, watching them drink, and learning about fires, forges, and hammering tools. Steel tools lose there edge fast on granite, you have to keep sharpening and sharpening them. Granite is hard; the men that work it have to be hard too.

Too bad I can't remember all the stories the old guys told and the things they did. The Hill was some place in those days, wild and tough, booming wide open. I took my first drink in that blacksmith shop. Old Jed [Wygant?] gave it to me. It liked to choke me. I couldn't talk for ten minutes, choking and gasping there with those old devils laughing at me. Well, I've had my share to drink since that day, I guess.

Not any more though. My stomach is bad — ulcers. Probably from drinking and the food they gave us over across in the War. Yes, I was over there. I can't tell you how bad it was. You wouldn't think men could go through what us men did. And now they're trying to start another one over there. 3 People are such goddamn fools... I can't believe in God since I saw what I did on the other side. Probably there's Something — but not the God they preach about. And I've seen things happen in the quarries that God never would let happen, not a decent God. My folks were all religious, too...

I went to that new Veteran's Hospital down to White River Junction, but I didn't stay long. They didn't help me and I'd rather be home. I don't mind not drinking, but I'd like to eat more once in awhile. Now I'm working again, feeling better. The worst of being sick for me is to lay around doing nothing. I like to keep busy - and I always have.

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Besides working in the shed we got a roller-skating place we run nights, and we get pretty good business. Alice helps me out. I come home from work, take a bath, change, and eat. On this diet of mine it don't take long to eat. Then we drive down to the rink and we're there until midnight. Not every night of course, but it makes a long day. Alice ran it when I was sick. She's always been a good wife, a good woman, and tried to help me all she could. Summer nights when there's no roller-skating I work around the house or in the garden. There's always things to be done. On week-ends we take trips with the kids sometimes. But once a year Alice and I go away somewhere by ourselves. We have a good life together — we always did.

I've worked beside Scotchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Swedes, and got along good with them, most all of them. Of course I 4 had my share of fights when I was younger. I know they don't like the Frenchmen who came in to take their jobs. You can't blame them for that. They still won't have anything to do with some French families, and most of the French stick together. But it's different with us and they all know it, and we get along fine. My wife's folks were an old Swedish family here.

My three brothers don't have anything to do with granite. They're all married now and we get together once or twice a year. One's in New Haven, Connecticut, one's in Portland, Maine, and the youngest one who just got married is in Barre. They all got pretty good jobs. Outside the family, my wife's and my people, we don't go out a whole lot. But lots of people call on us at home, we have our best times at home.

I own my house and a good car, I don't owe money to anybody. Not enough to count anyway. I've always like to pay for things when I get them — if I possibly can do it. My father taught me that, he was a pretty sharp shrewd fellow. But I couldn't do it if I depended just on working in the shed. I've always had a lot of other things going, and I've made investments. I knew I had to if I wanted to bring up a family of four kids any kind of way right... I've had my fun too, spent a lot money one way or another, wasted some... But I never threw it around the way some of these stonecutters do. If a single guy gets in

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the habit of spending his week's pay like a sailor, he will break out every so often even after he's married. That is, nine out of ten will. 5 Yes, I've seen accidents, in the sheds and quarries both. Just a year ago a young fellow was killed up on the Hill. A big strapping young fellow, not more than twenty or so. They were blasting in the spring — too early for blasting, everything damp and loose. A whole great ledge fell from the top rim. The men heard it coming like thunder and they ran. It carried almost across the bottom, and this boy was caught under it. He must have tripped or something. One end was on top of him, only his head, shoulders and arms were out. For three hours they worked to get him out, and he was alive and conscious all the time, conscious with his body crushed under that rock. He spoke to them while they worked. Gave them directions and everything. Once he even helped pass a chain under for them. Three hours he lay there... Jesus Christ! And he tried to joke with the blood coming out his mouth. "I got my stone already," he said. "A good big one too." And he tried to grin.

Three hours that way, by God. Then after they got him out he died.

The next day there were hundreds of cars and people up there to look at the place. That quarry is 300 feet deep. They drove up there, whole families, men, women, even little kids playing around the cars. Some of them took their lunches, made a regular picnic out of it. There were drunks with bottles and fellows with their arms around their girls...

I tell you it turned my stomach, honest to God, to see those people. I knew that boy and all his family. I thought 6 how they must feel. All those outsiders pointing and peering and talking about it. Still, I don't suppose that really mattered. And anyway I guess that's the way people are and the way the world is.